

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Address
“The Other America”

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(Recorded by Linda Gruber,
Transcribed by Patrick J. Carrenard)

Mr. Emrich, my dear friend, Congressman Conyers (Rep. John Conyers Jr., D, MI) Ladies and gentleman, I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here tonight and to have the great privilege of discussing with you, some of the vital issues confronting our nation and confronting the world. It is always a very rich and rewarding experience, when I can take a brief break from the day to day demands of our struggle for freedom and human dignity and discuss the issues involved in that struggle with concerned people of good will all over our nation and all over the world. And I certainly want to express my deep personal appreciation to you for inviting me to occupy this significant platform. I want to discuss the race problem tonight and I, want to discuss it very honestly. I still believe that freedom is the bonus you receive for telling the truth. Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. And I do not see how we will ever solve the turbulent problem of race confronting our nation, until there is an honest confrontation with it. And a willing search for the truth and a willing a willing ness to admit the truth when we discover it. And so I want to use as a title for my lecture tonight, ‘The Other America’. And I use this title because there are literally two Americas. Every city in our country has this kind of dualism, this schizophrenia, split at so many points and so every city ends up being two cities rather than one, there are two Americas. One America is beautiful situations. In this America, millions of people have the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality flowing before them. This America is the habitat of millions of people who have food and material necessities for their bodies, culture and education for their minds, freedom and human dignity for their spirits. In this

America children grow up in the sunlight of opportunity. But there is another America, and this other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms ebullience of hope into the fatigue of despair. In this other America thousands and thousands of people, men in particular, walk the streets and search for jobs that do not exist. In this other America, millions of people are forced to live in vermin filled depressing housing conditions where they do not have the privilege of having wall to wall carpet but all too often they end up with wall to wall rats and roaches. Almost 40% of the Negro families of America live in substandard housing conditions. In this other America thousands of young people are deprived of an opportunity to get an adequate education. By the, every year thousands finish high school reading at a seventh eighth and sometimes ninth grade level. Not because they are dumb not because they don't have the native intelligence but because the schools are so inadequate, so overcrowded, so devoid of equality, so segregated if you will that the best in these minds can never come out. Probably the most critical problem in the other America is the economic problem. There are so many people in the other America, who can never make ends meet because their incomes are far too low if they have incomes. And their jobs are so devoid of quality and so in this other America unemployment is a reality and underemployment is a reality...I'll just wait until our friend can have her say...I'll just wait until things are restored – everybody talks about law and order... what I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted...And I might say that I, that its my understanding that we will have a question and answer period. And if anybody disagrees with me you will have the privilege, ah, the opportunity, to raise a question if you think I'm a traitor. Then you'll have an opportunity to ask me about my traitor ness. And, I ah, we will give you that opportunity. Now let me get back to the point I was trying bring out about the economic problem. And that is one of the most critical problems that we face in America today. We find in the other America unemployment constantly

rising to astronomical proportions. And black people generally find themselves living in a literal depression. Now all too often when there is mass unemployment in the black community, it's referred to as a social problem and when there is mass unemployment in the white community it is referred to as a depression. But there is no basic difference the fact is that the Negro faces a literal depression all over the United States. The unemployment rate on the basis of statistics from the labor department is about 8.8 percent in the black community, but these statistics only take under consideration individuals who were once in the labor department or individuals who go into unemployment offices to seek employment. But they do not take under consideration the thousands of people who have given up, who have lost motivation. The thousands of people who have had so many doors closed in their faces that they feel defeated and they no longer go out to look for jobs. The thousands of people who come to feel that life is a long and desolate corridor with no exit sign. These people are considered the discouraged. When you add the discouraged to the individuals who can be calculated through statistics in the unemployment category the unemployment rate in the Negro community probably goes to 16 or 17 percent and among black youth it is in some communities as high as 40 and 45 percent. But the problem of unemployment is not the only problem, there is a problem of underemployment and there are thousands and thousands and I would say millions of people in the Negro community who are poverty stricken. Not because they are not working but because they receive wages so low, that they cannot begin to function in the main stream of the economic life of our nation. Most of the poverty stricken people of America are persons who are working every day and they end up getting part time wages for full time work. So the vast majority of Negroes in America find themselves perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. This has caused a great deal of bitterness. It has caused, it has caused a great deal of agony. It has caused ache and

anguish. It has caused great despair. And we have seen the acrid expressions of this despair and this bitterness in the violent rebellions that have taken place in cities all over our country. Now I think my views on non-violence are pretty generally known, I still believe that non-violence is the most potent weapon available to the Negro in his struggle for justice and freedom in the United States...I have been in the struggle a long time now. I've conditioned myself to some things that are much more painful than discourteous people not allowing me to speak so if they feel that they can discourage me they'll be here all night because I'm not...I wanted, I wanted to say something about... That we have lived over these last two or three summers with agony and we have seen our cities going up in flames. And I'll be the first to say that I am still committed to militant, powerful, massive, nonviolence as a most potent weapon in grappling with the problem from a direct action point of view powerful, I am absolutely convinced... I am absolutely convinced that a riot merely intensifies the fears of the white community while relieving the guilt. And I feel that we must always work with an effective, powerful, weapon and method that brings about tangible results. But it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that, without at the same time condemning the continued, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear, it has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last 12 to 15 years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity. Now every year at about this time our newspapers, and our televisions, and people generally, start talking

about the long hot summer ahead. And what always bothers me is that the long hot summer has always been preceded by a long cold winter. The great problem is that the nation has not used its winters creatively enough to develop the programs...To develop the kind of massive acts of concern, that will bring about a solution to the problem. And so we must still face the fact that our nation's summers of riot are caused by our nation's winters of delay. As long as justice is postponed we always stand on the verge of these darker nights of social disruption. The question now is whether America is prepared to do something massively, affirmatively, and forthrightly about the great problem that we face in the area of race. And the problem which can bring the curtain of doom down on American civilization, if it is not solved. And I would like to talk for the next few minutes about some of the things that must be done, if we are to solve this problem. The first thing I'd like to mention is that there must be a recognition on the part of everybody in this nation that America is still a racist country. Now however, unpleasant that sounds it is still the truth and we will never solve the problem of racism until there is a recognition of the fact that racism still stands at the center of so much of our nation and we must see racism for what it is. It is a myth of an inferior people, it is a notion that one group has all of the knowledge, all of the incites all of the purity, all of the worth, all of the dignity. And that the other group is worthless, on the lower level of humanity, inferior. To put it in philosophical language, racism is not based on some, ah, empirical generalization which after some studies would come to the conclusion that these people are behind because of environmental condition. Racism is based on an ontological affirmation. It is a notice, it is a notion that the very being of people is inferior. And the ultimate logic of racism is genocide. Hitler was a very sick man, he was one of the great tragedies of history. But he was honest he took his racism to its logical conclusion. The minute his racism caused him to sickly feel and and go about saying that there was something innately

inferior about the Jews he ended up killing 6 million Jews. The ultimate logic of racism is genocide. And if one say that one is not good enough to have a job that is a solid quality job. Or that one is not good enough to have access to public accommodations, that one is not good enough to have the right to vote, if one is not good enough to live next door to him, if one is not good enough to marry his daughter because of his race. Then at that moment that person is saying that that person who is not good enough to do it all, to do all of this, is not fit to exist or to live and that is the ultimate logic of racism. And we've gotta see that this still exists in American society. And until it is removed, there will be people walking the streets of life and living in their humble dwelling feeling that they are nobody. Feeling that they have no dignity. And feeling that they are not respected. And the first thing that must be on the agenda of our nation is to get rid of racism. Now secondly, we've gotta get rid of two or three myths. We've gotta get rid of two or three myths that still affect our nation. One is the myth of time. I'm sure you've heard this nation, it is the nation that only time can solve the problem of racial and injustice. And, ah, I've heard it from many sincere people, they said to Negro and his allies in the white community, you should slow up your pushing things too fast, only time can solve the problem and if you'll just be nice and patient and continue to pray in a hundred or two hundred years the problem will work itself out. There is an answer to that myth, it is that time is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. I'm sad to say to you tonight, that I'm absolutely convinced that the forces of ill will in our nation, the forces on the wrong side in our nation, the extreme righteous of our nation, have often used time much more effectively than the forces of good nature. And it may well be that we will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words of the bad people who will say bad things in a meeting like this, or who will bomb a church in Birmingham, Alabama. But for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who say wait your

time... Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be coworkers with God and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally. The primitive forces of social stagnation. And so we must always help time and realize that the time is always right to do right. Now there is another myth and there is a notion that that legislation can't solve the problem. That, ah, you've gotta change the heart. Now naturally I believe in changing the heart. I happen to be a Baptist preacher and that puts me in the heart changin' business. Sundown to sundown I'm preachin' about conversion, the need for the new birth and regeneration, I believe that there is something wrong with human nature. I believe ah, ah in original sin. Not in terms of a historical event but as a mythological category to explain the universality of evil. So I'm honest enough to see the gone wrong-ness of human nature. So naturally I'm not against changing the heart. And I do that there is a half-truth involved here that there is some truth in the whole question of changing the heart. We are not going to have a society we should have until the white person treats a Negro right not because the law says it, but because it's natural, because it's right, and because the black man is the white man's brother. And I will be the first to say that we will never...I will be the first to say that we will never have a truly integrated society a truly brotherly society, until men and women are obedient to the unenforceable. But after saying that, let me point out the other side. It may be true that morality can not be legislated, but the behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law can not change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me and I think that's pretty important also. So while legislation may not change the hearts of men it does change the habits of men when it's vigorously enforced. And when you change the habits of people pretty soon attitudes

get to be changed and people begin to see that they can do things that their fears cause them to feel that they could never do. And I say that there is a need still, for strong civil rights legislation in various areas. There is legislation, there is legislation in congress right now dealing with the whole question of housing and equal administration of justice. These things are very important for what I submit to you tonight, that there is no more dangerous development in our nation than the constant building up of predominantly Negro-central cities ringed by white suburbs this will do nothing but invite social disaster. And this problem has to be dealt with. Some through legislation, some through education, but it has to be dealt with in a very concrete and meaningful manner... I remember the other day I was on a plane and a man started talkin' with me and he said I'm I'm sympathetic toward, ah, what your tryin' to do but I just feel that you people don't do enough for yourself. And then he went on to say that, ah, my problem is, my concern is that I know of other ethnic groups many other ethnic groups that came to this country and they had problems just as Negroes and yet they did the job for themselves. They lifted themselves by their own bootstraps and why is it that Negroes can't do that?

And I looked at him and I tried to talk as understandingly as possible. But I said to him it does not help the Negro for unfeeling, insensitive white people to say that other ethnic groups that came to the country maybe a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago voluntarily have gotten ahead of them and he was brought here in chains involuntarily almost three-hundred and fifty years ago. I said it doesn't help them to be told that and then I went on to say to this gentleman, that he failed to recognize that no other ethnic group has been enslaved in America for so long. Then I had to go on to say to him that you fail to realize that, America made the black mans color a stigma. Something that he couldn't change. Not only was the color a stigma but even linguistics and semantics conspired against the black man so that his color was thought of as something very

evil. If you open Roget's Thesaurus and notice the synonyms for black you'll find about a hundred and twenty. And most of them represent something dirty, smut, degrading, low, and then when you turn to the synonyms for whites about a hundred and thirty all of them represent something high, pure, chaste, and you go right down that list. And so in the language ah, a white lie is a little better than a black lie. Ah, somebody goes wrong in the family we don't call 'em a white sheep we call 'em a black sheep. And then if, ah, you block somebody from getting somewhere you don't say they been white balled you say they been black balled. And ah just go down the line it's not whitemail, it's blackmail. I say all this to seriously say that the nation made the black man's color a stigma. And then I had to say to my friend on the plane another thing that is often forgotten in this country, that nobody, no ethnic group has completely lifted itself by its own boot straps. I can never forget that the black man was freed from the bondage of physical slavery in 1863 and he wasn't given any land to make that freedom meaningful. After being held in slavery 244 years and it was something like keeping a man in prison for many many years and then coming to see that he is not guilty for the crime for which he has convicted... And I was about to say that to free to have freed the Negro from slavery without doing anything to get him started in life or on a sound economic footing was almost like freeing a man who had been in prison many years, and it was discovered that he was unjustly convicted or that he was innocent of the crime for which he was convicted. And you go up to him and say now you're free. You don't give him any bus fare to get to town or you don't give him any money to buy some clothes to put on his back or to get started in life again. Every cold of jurisprudence would rise up against his. This is the very thing that happened to the black man in America. Then when we look at it, even deeper than this it becomes more ironic we reap in the harvest of this failure today. While America refused to do anything for the black man at that point. During that very period the

nation, through an act of congress, was giving away millions of acres of land in the west and the Midwest. Which meant that it was willing to undergird its white peasants from Europe with an economic floor. Not only did it give the land, it built land grant colleges for them so that they could learn how to farm. Not only that it provided land, ah, county agents to further their expertise in farming. It went beyond this, and it came to the point of providing low interest rates for these persons so that they could mechanize their farms. Today many of these persons are being paid millions of dollars a year in federal subsidies not to farm and these are so often the very people saying to the black man that he must lift himself by his own boot straps. I can never think... Senator Eastlin incidentally, who says this all the time, gets a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars a year not to farm on various areas of his plantation down in Mississippi. And yet he feels that we must do everything for ourselves. Well that, ah, appears to me to be a kind of socialism for the rich and rugged hard individualistic capitalism for the poor. Now let me say two other things. I'm gonna rush on, one I want to say that if we are to move ahead and solve this problem we must reorder our national priorities. Today we are spending almost thirty-five billion dollars a year to fight what I consider an unjust, ill-considered, evil, costly, unwinnable war at Vietnam. I wish I had time to go into the dimensions of that... I wish I had time to go into all of the dimensions of this but I must say that the war in Vietnam is playing havoc with our domestic destinies. That war has torn up the Geneva Acccord. It has strengthened, it has substituted... Those of us who oppose the war in Vietnam I feel are opposing it for many reasons. Many of them are moral reasons but, ah, one one basic reason is that we love our boys who are fighting there and we just want 'em to come back home. But I don't have time to go into the history and the development of the war in Vietnam. I happen to be a pacifist. But, ah, if I had had, ah, to make a decision about fighting a war against Hitler I may have temporarily given,

given up my pacifism and taken up arms. Ah, but nobody is going to compare what is happening in Vietnam today with that. Ah, I am convinced that this is clearly an unjust war and is doing so many things not only ah on the domestic scene it is carrying the whole world closer to nuclear annihilation. So I found it necessary to take a stand against the war in Vietnam and I appreciate Bishop Emerick's question. And I must answer it by saying that for me the two issues cannot be divided. It's nice for me to talk about...it's alright to talk about integrated schools and integrated lunch counters, ah, which I will continue to work for but I think it would be rather absurd for me to be concerned with integrated schools and not be concerned for the, about the survival of the world in which to integrate. The thing is that I have been working too long and too hard now against segregated public accommodations to end up at this stage of my life segregating my moral concern. I must make it clear that justice is indivisible injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Now for the first thing... civil rights, I think the war has hurt civil rights much more than my taking a stand against the war. And I could point out so many things to say that. Ah, a reporter asked me some time ago when I first took a strong stand against the war didn't I feel that I would have to reverse my position, ah, because so many people disagreed and people who once had respect for me wouldn't have respect. And he went on to say that I hear that its hurt the budget of your organization and don't you think that you'll have to get in line more with the administration's policy. And of course those are very lonely days when I first started speakin' out and not many people were speakin' out but now I have a lot of company. I'm not as lonesome now. Ah, but anyway I had to say to the reporter I'm sorry sir but you don't know me. I'm not a consensus leader. And I do not determine what is right and wrong by looking at the budget of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Or by kind of taking a look, ah, at a gallup poll and getting the expression of the majority opinion. Ultimately a genuine leader is

not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus . On some positions, on some positions cowardice asks the question is it safe. Expediency asks the question is it politic.

Vanity asks the question is it popular. The conscience asks the question is it right, and there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because conscience tells him it is right... I was going into the need for direct action to dramatize and call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment. I've been searching for a long time for an alternative, riots on the one hand and timid suffocations of injustice on the other. And, ah, I think that alternative is found in militant, massive non-violence. And I went into the question period before going into, ah, the Washington campaigns. But let me say that it has been my experience, in these years I've been in the struggle for justice that things just don't happen, until the issue is dramatized in a massive direct action way. And I never will forget. I came to Washington in 1964 in December coming from Oslo I stopped by to see President Johnson. We talked about a lot of things we finally got to the point of talking about voting rights. The President was concerned about voting, but he said Martin I can't get this through in this section of congress. I can't get a voting rights bill. He said because there are two or three other things that I feel we gotta get through and they're gonna benefit Negroes as much as anything. One was the education bill and something else... Well I went on to say to the president that I felt that we should do something about it and two weeks later we started a movement in Selma, Alabama. We started dramatizing the issue of the denial of the right to vote. And I submit to you that three months later as a result of that Selma movement the same president who said to me we could not get a voting rights bill in that section of congress was on the television singin' through a speaking voice we shall overcome and calling for the passage of the voting rights bill. And I

could go on and on to show ... could get a voting rights bill in that section of congress. Now I could go on to give many other examples to show that it just doesn't come about without pressure. This is what we plan to do in Washington we aren't plannin' to close down Washington we aren't plannin' to close down congress. This isn't anywhere in our plan. We are plannin' to dramatize the issue to the point that poor people in this nation will have to be seen and will not be invisible. Now let me finally say something in the realm of the spirit and then I'm gonna take my seat. Let me say finally, that in the midst of the hollering and in the midst of the discourtesy tonight we've gotta come to see that however much we dislike it, the destinies of white and black America are tied together. Now the racists don't understand this apparently, but our destinies are tied together. And somehow, we must all learn to live together, together as brothers in this country. Or we're gonna all perish together as fools. Our destinies are tied together. Now culturally and otherwise, every white person is a little bit Negro and every Negro is a little bit white, our language... our language, our music, our material prosperity and even our food are an amalgam of black and white. And so there can be no separate black path for power and fulfillment that does not intersect white roots. And there can ultimately be no separate white path for power and fulfillment short of social disaster, without recognizing the necessity of sharing that power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity, we must come to see. Yes we do need each other. The black man needs the white man to save him from his fear, and the white man needs the black man to free him from his guilt. John Donne was right, 'No man is an island and, time itself, every man is a piece of the continent of part of a man'. And he goes on toward the end to say, 'Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. Therefore send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee'. And somehow, we must come to see that in this pluralistic, interrelated society we all tie together in a single garment of destiny,

caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And by working with determination by realizing that power must be shared, I think that we can solve this problem and may I say, in conclusion, that our goal is freedom. And, ah, I believe we're gonna get there. It's gonna be more difficult from here on in, but I believe we're gonna get there. Because however much she strays away from it, the goal of America is freedom. And our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the pilgrim fathers landed in Plymouth we were here. Before Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence we were here. Before the beautiful words of the star spangled banner were written we were here. And for more than two centuries our forbears labored here without wages. They made cotton king. They built the homes of their masters in the midst of the most humiliating and oppressive conditions. And yet out of a bottomless vitality they continue to grow and develop. And if the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn't stop us, the opposition that we now face including the white backlash will surely fail. We are going to win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of the almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands. And so however difficult it is during this period, however difficult it is to continue to live with the agony, the continued existence of racism, however difficult it is to live amidst the constant hurt and the constant insult and the constant disrespect, I can still say we shall over come. We shall over come because the arc of the Moral Universe is long but it bends toward justice. We shall over come because Carlyle is right, 'No lie can live forever'. We shall over come because William Collard Bryant is right, 'Truth pressed to earth will rise again'. We shall over come because James Russell Lowell is right, 'Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold sways the future'. We shall over come because the bible is right, 'You shall reap what you sow'. And with this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith

we will be able to transform the jangling discourse of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when all of God's children all of over this nation black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual 'Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we are free at last'.